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Research and analysis

Findings of Ofsted's Big Listen public consultation

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Applies to England

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Acknowledgement

We would like to thank everyone who took the time to respond to the Big Listen public consultation. Respondents were thoughtful and open about how Ofsted needs to change, and we appreciate your contributions. We specifically want to thank those who shared difficult experiences they have had with Ofsted and the impact it had on them. We have known, for a long time now, that we have lost the trust of too many in the education and social care sector – and we will work to win it back.

Context

Ofsted is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. We inspect services that provide education and skills for learners of all ages in England. We also inspect and regulate services that care for children and learners.

In January 2024, His Majesty's Chief Inspector, announced his intention to carry out the Big Listen, a comprehensive consultation that asked for people's views on how to improve our approach to inspection and regulation. The Big Listen was launched in early March. It gave professionals, children and learners, parents, carers, and the public an opportunity to give their feedback on our work.

In September 2024, we published our [response to the Big Listen](#), setting out the actions we will take to address what we heard.

This report sets out the findings from our Big Listen public consultation.

Alongside this report, we also published evidence from other activities that formed part of the [Big Listen](#):

- [Ofsted: public consultation data tables](#)
- [Ofsted: public consultation data tables \(sub-groups\)](#)
- [Independent report, written by IFF Research, into the views of the professionals we work with](#)
- [Independent report, written by NatCen, into the views of the parents and carers we work for](#)
- [Report detailing results of our children's survey](#)
- [The internal Big Listen: responding to our people](#)
- [Independent learning review led by Dame Christine Gilbert](#)
- [Ofsted's response to Dame Christine Gilbert's independent learning review](#)

Find all [supporting documents](#) for the Ofsted Big Listen response.

Executive summary

Between 8 March and 31 May 2024, we ran a 12-week public consultation that asked people for their views across 4 areas: Ofsted's culture, our inspection practice, reporting and the impact of inspection.

Respondents could give us their views through free-text and by answering closed questions about the sectors that Ofsted inspects and/or regulates:

- early years
- schools
- further education and skills (FE and skills)
- teacher development, which includes initial teacher education (ITE) and early career framework (ECF) and national professional qualification (NPQ) programmes
- special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and alternative provision
- children's social care

The Big Listen public consultation received 16,033 responses, which made it the

largest consultation in Ofsted's history. Although the public consultation was open to all, it is unlikely to be representative of the general public. As with all public consultations, we expected to hear mostly from those who feel they have a stake in what is being consulted on – which in this case was about how Ofsted needs to change. We were therefore not surprised that, overall, respondents shared critical views of Ofsted, and we have accurately reflected this in the report.

Ofsted's culture

We heard that, across all sectors, inspection can have a negative impact on staff well-being and mental health. Respondents told us that there is a culture of fear around inspections. Respondents from across all sectors said that they do not see us as open or responsive to feedback and criticism. They want greater transparency in the way we work. In early years, schools and FE and skills, respondents raised concerns about the way we handle complaints. They called for a more independent process.

Inspection practice

Respondents want more supportive and collaborative inspections, carried out by inspectors who have the right level of expertise in the type of provision they are inspecting.

We heard that consistency is very important, but respondents do not think we always achieve this.

Respondents told us that we need to consider the unique local context and challenges of each provider on inspection. In some sectors, respondents told us we need to do more to engage with parents, children and stakeholders and ask them for feedback. Respondents also called for inspection frameworks that are tailored to different phases of education and different types of providers.

Respondents had concerns that we are not getting a full picture of individual schools' SEND provision. They want us to do more to engage with pupils with SEND and their parents, as well as to give more nuanced and detailed evaluations of SEND provision.

Respondents had mixed views about the notice period for inspections that we currently give providers. Some respondents felt this should be longer, while others felt there should be less or no notice given. Across all sectors, those who suggested that the notice period should be longer said that the current short notice period is a source of stress for staff.

Reporting

Respondents told us that single-word judgements over-simplify the complexities of provision and do not give a full picture of the provider. They advocated for their removal.

We asked respondents what was important for us to report on. Across all sectors, it was clear that reporting on the experience of the child or learner was important to respondents.

The majority of respondents also want us to report on the provision for children and learners with SEND and how well the most disadvantaged children and learners learn and develop in a provider.

Most respondents felt it is important that we report on the quality of education and on our other current sub-judgements (personal development, behaviour and attitudes, and leadership and management). In relation to schools, 80% of respondents said it was 'very important' or 'important' that Ofsted reports give a clear judgement for each of these.

Reporting on what it is like for a child to attend a provider was very important to respondents. They want reports to focus not just on academic outcomes, but also on children and learners' holistic development. They also want us to report on children and learners' progress from their individual starting points.

Respondents also told us that our reports should prioritise children and learners' happiness and mental well-being.

Inspection impact

The majority of respondents agreed that we hold providers to account for keeping children and learners safe. But only around half agreed that we hold providers to account for the quality of education offered. Across all sectors, about half of the respondents agreed that we hold providers to account for the quality of their SEND provision.

Across all sectors, respondents tended to disagree that the number of good and outstanding providers gives a strong indication of the overall quality of the education and care system. In relation to schools, only 13% of respondents agreed with this. The highest agreement was in relation to social care, where 29% of respondents agreed with this.

We heard that there were some unintended consequences of inspection. Around half of respondents agreed that the inspection system can lead to schools keeping children in the classroom who may put other pupils at risk, may benefit from off-site provision or may need to be suspended or even excluded. Around half (46%) also agreed that it can lead to exclusion, suspension and off-rolling. In social care, the

majority (70%) of respondents agreed that inspection can lead to children's homes not accepting the children most in need into their care.

Most respondents were in favour of expanding Ofsted's inspection powers to include multi-academy trusts and groups of schools (62% were in favour) and chains of early years providers (68% were in favour). The highest proportion (84%) agreed that we should be able to address unregistered providers that have vulnerable children in their care.

Safeguarding in schools

Respondents told us that safeguarding should be a priority in inspections and that failure to safeguard children should be urgently addressed. They also told us that safeguarding should be inspected separately from standard school inspections. Most respondents (84%) felt safeguarding should be a separate judgement, rather than sit under the 'leadership and management' judgement as it does currently.

While around half (58%) of all respondents felt that safeguarding should be inspected more regularly than other areas, there was a difference of opinion between respondent types, with 86% of parents agreeing compared with 54% of school staff.

Methodology

The consultation gained ethical approval from our Research Ethics Committee.

We asked a mixture of free-text and closed questions for each sector that we inspect or regulate. We organised the questions around the themes of Ofsted's culture, inspection practice, reporting and inspection impact. The consultation was open to all and was a way of gathering our stakeholders' views. People were asked in which capacity they were responding (for example, as a teacher) and to indicate their type of workplace if answering in a professional capacity.

For the closed questions, we analysed responses as a percentage of the respondents who answered the question. We chose not to report all percentages within the narrative to keep the report succinct, [but we have published the full data tables separately](#). We used artificial intelligence (AI) to help us analyse the free-text box responses, to be more efficient. This was fully validated by a team of data science and social research professionals. Details of the approach are discussed in the annex.

Given the high number of responses to the public consultation, it was not possible to include all views in this report. The absence of a particular issue or viewpoint does not indicate that it is less important, and we value all contributions we have received.

There is more about our methodology in [Annex 1](#).

How to read this document

It is worth noting that we have limited our reporting to what we heard from the public consultation. The language used reflects how AI summarised the choice of words from respondents. In some cases, responses reflected misconceptions about Ofsted's policies and practices, and we have included these in the report without any caveats or corrections. We have not commented on or responded to any of the views shared through the public consultation in this report. If readers wish to see how we have responded, please go to [The Big Listen response](#).

Who we heard from

The Big Listen public consultation received 16,033 responses.

People could tell us in what capacity they were responding to the consultation. For example, they could say if they were responding as a teacher, parent and carer, or any of 35 other listed roles (or they could type in another role). Many people said that they were responding in more than one capacity.

Almost 40% of respondents said that they were teachers. More respondents told us they were teachers than any other role. For example, more than 30% of the respondents who answered questions relating to social care said that they were teachers, compared with 5% who said they were managers of children's social care services.

Almost a quarter (23%) of respondents told us that they were parents. A third of these parents also said that they were teachers, and about half said they had a role in a sector that Ofsted inspects or regulates (for example, a parent and social worker or a parent and childminder).

What we heard about Ofsted's culture

We asked respondents about our organisational culture. We wanted to gather views on how open we are and how well we listen to feedback and accept criticism. We also wanted to understand more about the impact of our work on the well-being of those we work with and for. There were no closed questions in this part of the consultation. This section of the report gives details of the free-text

responses we received.

Staff well-being

Respondents said inspection can have a negative impact on staff well-being and mental health. This was the case across all sectors. Respondents said the process is high-stakes, stressful, pressured and causes considerable anxiety.

School respondents said that Ofsted does not consider the well-being of staff during inspections. We heard that the atmosphere during inspections can be detrimental to the well-being of the school community. Some respondents said the high-stakes nature of inspections can contribute to staff burnout. They said the fear of receiving a notification call and the pressure to perform well contribute to stress and anxiety about inspections. Respondents said that the stress and workload associated with inspections mean that staff are less able to focus on teaching and learning. They said that single-word judgements are harmful because they fail to capture the complexities of schools and they contribute to stress and poor staff morale. Respondents said that Ofsted focuses on fault-finding and needs to be more empathetic. They said that Ofsted is having a negative impact on the recruitment and retention of educators.

Early years professionals said that the impact of inspection on mental health potentially affects the quality of care and education. They said that some professionals leave the sector due to the pressure.

Parent and carers in early years and schools did not mention the impact of inspection on staff's mental health, but this was a key issue for staff respondents.

Respondents talked about the need for change. FE and skills respondents called for a more supportive approach to reduce staff anxiety. They said Ofsted should train inspectors to understand the emotional impact of inspections and act with empathy and respect. Teacher development respondents called for a more supportive, understanding and respectful culture at Ofsted. SEND respondents said the inspection process puts undue pressure on staff. They said this is due to unrealistic expectations and excessive workload.

Feedback and openness

Across all sectors, respondents said that Ofsted is not open or responsive to feedback and criticism. They called for more transparency in the way we work.

School respondents said there is a need for more open dialogue during inspection. They said this would foster positive relationships. Respondents felt there is limited opportunity to discuss and respond to areas for improvement. They described Ofsted as a closed-loop system. They said the organisation is defensive and

dismissive of concerns raised by schools. School respondents said they faced challenges raising concerns, despite recent changes to the feedback process. They were sceptical about Ofsted's willingness to listen to feedback, to change and to improve its practices.

Early years respondents said it is difficult to give feedback to Ofsted because communication channels are unclear, and that the organisation is unresponsive. They said they are fearful of repercussions if they provide feedback and feel that feedback is not valued. They said inspectors need to actively listen and engage more collaboratively.

Early years respondents also did not trust that Ofsted is willing to change or improve based on feedback it receives from stakeholders. They did not feel that Ofsted genuinely listens to feedback from practitioners or parents. Early years respondents also said there is a disconnect between formal inspection outcomes and parents' views. They suggested that parents' feedback and direct engagement with providers are more reliable indicators of quality. They called for a more fair, reflective and inclusive inspection system.

FE and skills respondents said that Ofsted is not open to listening. They said we should be willing to engage more in dialogue with providers. Respondents called for a more open and accessible feedback system. They said we need to communicate more clearly throughout the inspection process and have a reliable way to discuss reports and raise concerns.

Teacher development respondents said that Ofsted ignores feedback and concerns and does not act on them. They said this leads to a lack of trust in the organisation. They said they find it difficult to provide feedback to Ofsted during inspections because they fear there will be negative repercussions. They said there is a need for a more reflective and inclusive inspection process and a more reliable feedback process. Respondents expressed concern about the influence of government policy on Ofsted's priorities and the independence of the inspection process.

Social care respondents also highlighted challenges and concerns about the feedback process. They said it is unreliable and untransparent and that communication from inspectors is inconsistent. Respondents said Ofsted needs to be more approachable and reflective. They said there is a need for an independent feedback system that does not have a negative influence on inspection outcomes. They called for Ofsted to be more open to listening and to act on feedback from various providers.

Respondents talking about SEND said Ofsted is not accountable for its actions. They felt that Ofsted is not open to two-way communication and is working against schools, not with them. They said there are no clear mechanisms for providing ongoing feedback to Ofsted. They said this makes it difficult to contribute to inspection. They also said there is variability in how receptive different inspectors are to feedback. Respondents called for reform to ensure that inspections are transparent and inclusive and that complaints and feedback are handled properly. They said the current inspection system is overly politicised, outdated, and ineffective in addressing the needs of children and learners with SEND.

Complaints

Early years, schools, and FE and skills respondents all expressed concerns about Ofsted's handling of complaints. They called for a more independent process.

School respondents said Ofsted lacks accountability, particularly in how it handles complaints and the behaviour of its inspectors. They said the complaints process is ineffective and not transparent. They said Ofsted is defensive and dismissive of valid criticism. They called for an independent body to investigate complaints.

Early years respondents also said the complaints process is not fair or transparent. They said the internal handling of complaints has led to distrust from the sector. FE and skills respondents said the complaints process should be independent so that concerns can be reviewed objectively.

Inspectors' conduct

We heard from respondents across the early years, schools, FE and skills, and social care sectors that there is a culture of fear around inspections.

Early years, school and FE and skills respondents said inspections can be intimidating. School respondents said that sometimes inspectors exhibit 'bullying' behaviour. They felt that Ofsted does not respect educators and the professional nature of their work. FE and skills respondents said inspectors' behaviour sometimes causes professionals distress.

Social care respondents said that providers sometimes feel targeted and persecuted by inspections, rather than supported. They said that some inspectors are open and respectful, while others are dismissive and agenda-driven.

Respondents with concerns about inspectors' conduct called for better management from Ofsted.

What we heard about inspection practice

We asked respondents how important various aspects of inspection and regulation practice were to them. For all sectors other than SEND, we asked closed questions about the consistency of the inspection process and the length of inspections. We asked some sectors other questions, such as whether we should consider the local context in judgements and respondents' views on notice periods. We also invited respondents to comment on any aspect of inspection

practice. This section provides the key findings from closed questions and free-text responses on inspection practice.

More supportive and collaborative inspections

Respondents expressed a strong desire for inspections to be more supportive and collaborative. This was a theme across all sectors. They said inspection should focus on development and continuous improvement and not high-stakes judgements and criticism. Respondents in schools and early years also said that inspections should not be punitive.

Respondents said a more collaborative approach would help schools to improve, rather than instilling fear. They wanted inspectors to work with schools to identify their strengths and areas for development. They called for Ofsted to offer practical advice and constructive feedback. They said Ofsted should also offer more guidance and resources to help schools improve.

Respondents would like Ofsted to play an active role in school improvement instead of making judgements. They said school improvement efforts should be sustainable and involve collaboration for long-term success. Others said Ofsted should carry out short, regular, and consistent quality assurance visits to evaluate schools over time. Respondents also criticised the current inspection framework. They said it is outdated and not conducive to school improvement.

Early years respondents called for a reform of Ofsted's framework and approach. They suggested that inspections should be an opportunity for growth and improvement. They wanted Ofsted to treat providers as partners rather than adversaries. Listening to providers and working with them to improve standards were part of this. After an inspection, respondents felt that Ofsted should offer guidance and support, rather than leaving them to resolve issues on their own. They felt this is especially important when providers need to improve. As in schools, respondents called for Ofsted to offer more constructive feedback and resources to help them improve their practice. They suggested this should focus on dialogue and constructive feedback rather than high-stakes judgements. They said the current system is confrontational and creates stress rather than fostering improvement.

FE and skills respondents also called for a supportive model with clear guidance on improvement. They said Ofsted should highlight best practice and offer training and support. They said there should be an understanding of each provider and what they do rather than just checks against the framework.

Consistency

Respondents felt consistency was very important. But they did not think Ofsted

always achieves it. They thought there was too much inconsistency in the inspection process. This was a theme across all sectors. Respondents said there was often variability in inspectors' approaches. They said some inspectors have preconceived agendas, biases or specific personal interests that influence the inspection. Respondents felt that, as a result, experiences and outcomes vary depending on individual inspectors. They called for a more fair, standardised and consistent inspection process.

The importance of consistency was also reflected in responses to closed questions. Consistency was identified as 'very important' or 'important' by a majority of respondents in relation to all sectors that Ofsted inspects and regulates. This ranged from 88% (FE and skills) to 93% (early years).

Respondents in different sectors were particularly concerned about some aspects of consistency. In schools, respondents discussed what they perceived as the subjective nature of judgements. They said this inconsistency in the inspection process and inspectors' approach leads to stress and fear among staff. They said that some inspectors are approachable, while others are rude.

In early years, respondents said that observations need to be honest and consistent across providers. They called for less personal judgement. In social care, respondents said inspectors interpret regulations in different ways.

In FE and skills, respondents said that some inspectors show favouritism towards certain types of institutions, such as colleges over independent training providers. They also said there needs to be standardisation across regions. They said they would like inspectors who currently work in the sector or have relevant experience. Closed questions also showed that consistency across types of providers was 'very important' or 'important' to most respondents in relation to both FE and skills (81%) and schools (81%).

Context of providers

In their comments, respondents said that we need to consider the unique local context and challenges of each provider on inspection. This was a clear theme across all sectors.

School respondents said it is important to consider the demographics of each school and the challenges it faces in its community. This included pupils' socio-economic status, and factors like deprivation levels and pupil premium percentages. They said Ofsted should tailor inspections to take account of these contexts, rather than applying a uniform standard. Respondents also said that Ofsted should consider the funding and resources available to schools. They felt this would achieve more fair and accurate assessments.

School respondents discussed the challenges schools face around pupils' attendance and behaviour. They said these issues affect educational outcomes. They called for inspectors to consider the reasons for low attendance rates more,

rather than penalising schools. They mentioned that mental health and disabilities are possible causes of reduced attendance. Respondents said they would like inspectors to respect the professional judgement of educators, in relation to the context of the school and the pupils.

In early years, respondents said Ofsted should reflect the context of each provider in inspection outcomes. They said we should recognise challenges, such as the impact of funding and limited resources on meeting standards. Respondents highlighted financial and staffing challenges. They said Ofsted should act as an advocate for early years education and work with the government to address these issues.

Respondents who talked about context in relation to SEND said that funding and resources available for SEND provision impact schools' ability to meet pupils' needs. This included the availability and quality of specialist support staff, and the level of support and services provided by local authorities. They felt Ofsted should consider this during inspections.

In early years, schools, FE and skills, and social care, we asked respondents about the importance of taking the local area's context into account when making inspection judgements. This was 'very important' or 'important' to most respondents across all of these sectors (ranging from 82% in relation to FE and skills to 87% in relation to schools).

Inspector expertise

Respondents said it is vital that inspectors have appropriate levels of expertise to inspect different types of providers. This was important to respondents across all sectors.

In early years and schools, respondents said that inspectors need experience in the phase or type of school they are inspecting. They said this would ensure that evaluations are accurate and empathetic. Specifically in schools, they said secondary-experienced inspectors should not inspect primary schools. They said this was both unfair and ineffective. Respondents said inspectors need to have knowledge of the primary school context to inspect them.

In FE and skills, respondents said inspectors should have a deeper understanding of specialised provision. This included high-needs and vocational training. Respondents also said inspectors of teacher development should have relevant backgrounds.

In SEND, respondents called for reform of the inspection of special schools. They emphasised the need for inspectors to have relevant experience and understanding of SEND. This included a deep understanding of the unique challenges and requirements of these providers. They said inspectors need to have a better understanding of neurodivergence. They said this would better enable inspectors to carry out fair and effective evaluations. Respondents said

specialised inspectors would increase the accountability of special schools and the improvement they make.

Early years respondents said that some Ofsted inspectors lack expertise, and that this leads to inappropriate judgements. They said inspectors can fail to understand unique aspects of early years providers. Respondents also said that inspectors should have relevant qualifications. They said they need experience and up-to-date expertise in early childhood education.

Evaluating SEND provision

In comments, respondents called for more nuanced and detailed evaluations of SEND provision. They said there should be a greater focus on individual learners' needs. Respondents also said Ofsted should improve engagement with pupils who have SEND, their parents and school staff. Parents who have children with SEND told us that they feel excluded from the inspection process and believe their views are not always adequately considered. They would like their feedback to be given more weight during inspections. Respondents shared concerns that inspectors do not proactively find pupils with SEND and parents to speak to. Instead, they feel inspectors rely on schools to nominate parents to provide feedback. They said this may not provide a full picture of the school's SEND provision.

Respondents discussed the limitations and potential dangers of putting too much emphasis on data when inspecting SEND provision. They argued for a nuanced approach that allows use of schools' internal data. They said special schools should be able to present relevant data that may not align with traditional measures. They felt this would help them illustrate the progress and achievement of their pupils.

In closed questions, we asked respondents with an interest in SEND to rate the importance of various aspects of inspection. The proportion rating each area as 'very important' or 'important' was:

93% for focusing on whether services and schools meet children's needs.

92% for understanding whether they are offering positive experiences that will lead to improved future outcomes.

84% for using feedback from parents, carers, and children on inspection.

74% for using data to understand outcomes.

Capturing views from parents, children and stakeholders

Respondents said Ofsted needs to do more in some sectors to engage with and seek feedback from parents, children, and stakeholders.

In early years, respondents shared concerns about a lack of engagement with parents. They said Ofsted needs to introduce ways of gathering feedback continuously from parents. They said more feedback from parents and children would give inspectors a better view of a provider's quality and effectiveness. Both parents and professional respondents agreed that there was a need for more opportunities for parents to offer their views.

Parents of pupils in schools also wanted to be more involved in the inspection process. They wanted to be able to speak directly with inspectors and provide honest feedback. This was especially the case for parents of pupils with additional needs. Unlike in early years, professionals in schools did not discuss the need for more feedback from parents in inspections.

Respondents said social care inspectors should better engage children on inspection. They said inspections need to include more children's voices. Respondents discussed more effective ways of gathering feedback from children, young people, and care providers. They felt that this would help them to understand the children's experiences of care. They advocated for a more collaborative, trauma-informed, and child-centred approach to inspections.

Social care respondents also said that Ofsted needs to adopt a strengths-based, outcomes-focused approach. They said this should prioritise the experiences and feelings of children and young people in care.

We asked social care respondents a closed question about the experiences and progress of children and young people. We asked them to rate how important it is that Ofsted look at this alongside compliance and practice during inspections. Most respondents indicated that this was either 'very important' or 'important' (90%).

Inspection frameworks

Respondents across schools, FE and skills and teacher development discussed the limitations of the current inspection framework. School respondents called for tailored inspection frameworks for different phases of education. School professionals said the framework does not adequately differentiate between

primary and secondary education. They said applying it to both is unfair and does not reflect the unique challenges and structures of different phases. They said this results in inappropriate judgements and stress for staff.

School respondents also said that the current 'deep dive' methodology does not work in small primary schools. They felt it was unfair and burdensome for teachers who lead multiple subjects. They called for a revised, more tailored process. Professionals also said there needs to be a differentiated framework for special schools.

FE and skills respondents also discussed some of the challenges and inadequacies of the current framework. They said the current framework cannot always fairly assess different types of providers. They highlighted the need for tailored approaches that would suit the diverse needs of providers based in different sectors, such as higher education.

In a closed question, we asked teacher development respondents whether they felt it was important that we consolidate our inspection practices, where possible. For example, we asked whether, if an ITE or ECF/NPQ programme provider is delivering 2 or 3 courses, we should inspect them at the same time. A majority (67%) thought this was either 'very important' or 'important'.

Notice period for inspections

Free-text responses revealed a range of views about the notice period given for inspections. In schools, respondents said that the current notice period is too short and causes unnecessary stress and panic among staff. They said it signifies a lack of trust in professionals and contributes to a culture of fear.

Opinions about notice periods for early years providers varied. Respondents discussed whether no notice or more notice would lead to fairer assessments and less stress for staff. Those who said more notice would be beneficial felt the current notice period is a significant source of stress and anxiety for staff.

Parents of children and pupils in early years and schools indicated a preference for no-notice inspections to get a true reflection of providers. Early years parents said giving notice allows providers to prepare and potentially alter their normal practices.

The normal notice period for FE and skills providers is 2 days but can be up to 6 working days for large and complex providers. FE and skills respondents described the challenges and stress caused by short notice periods. Those who called for more notice said it would reduce anxiety and enable providers to be better prepared.

Teacher development respondents suggested longer notice periods would reduce the burden on staff.

In closed questions, we asked how important it is that notice of early years, schools, FE and skills and teacher development inspections is 'short but appropriate'. The proportions of respondents who rated this 'very important' or 'important' ranged from 55% for schools to 67% for ITE. Across early years, social care, schools, and FE and skills, at least a third of respondents rated this either 'not very important' or 'not at all important', or said they were 'neutral'.

Inspection window and frequency

Respondents also commented on the 'inspection window'. This is the time between inspections. They said the prolonged period when schools know an inspection might happen creates anxiety and stress for leaders and staff. They said this makes it more difficult to focus on day-to-day teaching and school improvement.

Early years respondents said that inspections should occur more frequently but be less intense and intimidating. They said this would provide a more accurate view of daily operations. Parents and carers said more regular inspections would ensure ongoing compliance with standards and prevent complacency.

Inspection length

There were mixed views on inspection length in free-text comments. For example, early years respondents expressed varied opinions on inspection length. Some advocated for shorter inspections and others for longer, in-depth inspections. Some said the current system results in inconsistent or superficial judgements because there is limited time for observations.

In closed questions, we asked how important it is that early years, schools, FE and skills and teacher development inspections are long enough to make accurate judgements. Across all these sectors, most respondents indicated this was either 'very important' or 'important' (ranging from 83% in relation to schools to 89% in relation to social care).

What we heard about reporting

The consultation set out the topics that we aim to address in every inspection report. Some of these are already required by law. We asked respondents how important they thought each topic was through a number of closed questions. We also asked an open-ended question about what respondents think our priorities should be when reporting and how we could improve. This section gives details

about what people think is important for us to consider, and prioritise, when reporting inspection outcomes.

In relation to the 6 sectors in which we carry out inspections, we posed a total of 43 closed questions relating to various aspects of provision. Across each inspection area, respondents said that the experience of the child or learner was the highest priority for reporting.

For 38 of the 43 items, at least three quarters of respondents indicated that the issue was either 'very important' or 'important' to them. This suggests that respondents believe that inspection reports should address a wide range of topics. These include the importance of reporting on the quality of provision for children and learners with SEND or, in relation to schools and FE and skills, on the range of issues that are currently addressed through inspection sub-judgements.

The issue least likely to be seen as 'very important' or 'important' was making clear any links a school or early years provider might have with other providers (47% of schools respondents and 48% of early years respondents said this was 'very important' or 'important'). The other issues that less than three quarters of respondents indicated were either 'very important' or 'important' were:

For schools: making clear how pupils' outcomes and other data have affected the school's overall grade (65% of school respondents said this was 'very important' or 'important').

For early years: making clear how well children learn and develop in a setting and comparing this with local and national outcomes (59% of early years respondents said this was 'very important' or 'important').

For early years: making clear how well the most disadvantaged children learn and develop in the setting (72% of early years respondents said this was 'very important' or 'important').

Inspection report content

Respondents shared criticisms about current inspection reports. They told us that inspection reports should be transparent, provide constructive feedback and offer areas for improvement. They felt this would foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Single-word judgements

Respondents strongly advocated for the removal of the single-word judgement grading system. Single-word judgements were heavily criticised for oversimplifying the complexities of providers and not providing a full picture of their performance. Respondents suggested that the judgements can be damaging and lead to extra stress for staff.

Instead of single-word judgements, respondents suggested a more detailed and nuanced reporting method. They would like this to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the provider. School staff said this method would be less harmful and would help to foster a culture of continuous improvement. Early years staff said it would be less stigmatising.

Parent and carer respondents did not hold strong views about single-word judgements. Parents in early years said that the judgements are simplistic and do not provide a nuanced view of the provider. But this was not a common theme for parents in schools.

The experience of children and learners

Respondents thought it was very important for Ofsted to report on what it is like for a child or learner to attend a provider. Responses to closed questions suggest this was true across all types of providers that Ofsted inspects. In relation to early years, schools, FE and skills, and children's social care, at least 94% of respondents indicated it was 'very important' or 'important' that Ofsted reports make clear what it is like for a child to attend the provider. This includes, for example, whether children are safe and happy.

Respondents in early years expressed views that children learn best when they are happy, safe, and secure. They emphasised that reports should focus on how providers ensure a secure and nurturing environment. Respondents in early years would like the relationships and communication between the provider, the parents and the children to be a key focus of inspection reports. They told us that the relationships between the provider and parents are vital. Both staff and parents in early years would like inspection reports to highlight how the providers demonstrate effective communication and engagement with parents. Respondents in early years would also like reports to comment on the communication between staff and children, as this is important for child development.

Parents in schools told us that inspection reports fail to capture the true day-to-day experiences of children in schools.

Respondents in social care would like inspection reports to include how the provider's staff training helps staff to understand and support learners' needs.

Some respondents also suggested changing inspection frameworks to better reflect these priorities.

Children and learners' well-being

Respondents in all sectors would like inspection reports to prioritise learners' well-being, including staff support for children and learners' well-being and mental health. They told us that reports should prioritise giving details of inspectors' evaluation of the well-being and mental health of pupils over academic results and attendance. Parents in early years told us that reporting on children's safety, happiness, and overall well-being should be the top priority. Respondents in FE and skills also told us that reporting on learners' well-being, including staff support for learners' well-being and mental health, should be prioritised. In schools, there were strong calls for inspection reports to include insights on the well-being and mental health of staff as a priority.

Several responses said the focus on attendance has a negative impact on children with health issues and those facing emotional-based school avoidance.

In social care, respondents said that children's happiness should be a core aim, and that providers should ensure their mental well-being and sense of security.

Quality of education

We asked how important it is that reports address the quality of education at schools and providers of early years, FE and skills, SEND/alternative provision and teacher development. This included how well children and learners acquire knowledge and skills, and how well the provider plans and teaches the curriculum and checks that children and learners have learned it. The proportion of respondents who said that this was either 'very important' or 'important' ranged from 80% (schools) to 94% (early years).

Staff in schools told us that Ofsted should encourage a broad and balanced curriculum that includes arts, sports, and personal development, rather than an excessive focus on core subjects. They would like reports to focus on the quality of curriculum and learning experiences provided to students.

When FE and skills learners are engaging with employers as part of their education, respondents believe that Ofsted should report on its evaluation of employer engagement in shaping the curriculum and supporting learners.

Outcomes for children and learners

We asked respondents whether it is important for reports to comment on how the provider is contributing to children's and learners' educational outcomes and performance.

Parent and staff respondents told us it is important that reports focus on the quality of the curriculum, learning experiences and the care provided for children and learners. Respondents in all sectors wanted Ofsted to measure pupils' progress based on individual starting points. But respondents did not want reports to focus only on academic outcomes and test results. They suggested that reports should focus on children and learners' holistic development.

In early years, parents and staff suggested that inspections should take a holistic view of child development. They said inspectors should consider emotional, social and physical development alongside learning outcomes. Respondents in early years would also like reports to place more emphasis on the importance of play-based learning for children's early education.

School respondents said that there is too much focus on data and exam results. They said this can overshadow other important aspects of education.

In FE and skills and teacher development, respondents highlighted the need for reports to focus on learners' achievements, including support for achieving qualifications. They also would like reports to comment on the effectiveness of teaching. They said this should also focus on individual learners' progress and the support provided to achieve personal growth. Respondents suggested that teacher development reports, for instance, should emphasise how providers prepare trainees for the workplace.

SEND and disadvantage

In relation to early years, schools, and FE and skills, we asked respondents how important it is that reports make clear what the provider does to support children and learners with SEND, and how well the most disadvantaged children and learners learn and develop in the provider.

A majority of respondents said that reporting specifically on provision for each of these groups was 'very important' or 'important'. In each sector, SEND provision was more frequently identified as 'very important' or 'important' than provision for disadvantaged children (for example, 92% compared with 72% for early years provision, 89% compared with 76% for schools and 89% compared with 82% for FE and skills). Free-text responses indicated that respondents would like reports to recognise the additional challenges and resources required to meet the needs of children and learners with SEND. Respondents wanted reports to reflect inclusion and diversity, especially relating to disadvantaged children and learners.

Respondents felt that reports should focus more on how schools support pupils with SEND, ensuring that their needs are met and that they make progress. They

told us that schools should be commended for inclusivity and for measuring the progress of children with SEND based on their individual starting points rather than solely on their academic outcomes.

Parents of children and learners with SEND said that Ofsted inspections do not focus enough on SEND, and that this means SEND provision is not sufficiently scrutinised. Parents would like us to report specifically on SEND provision and outcomes, and to make this a priority in our assessments and reports.

In schools, respondents would like reports to show how providers make sure that pupils with SEND are included in all aspects of school life. Some parents told us that they feel children with SEND can be overlooked by providers. Responses highlighted concerns from parents that Ofsted and schools are not currently prioritising the mental health and well-being of children and learners with SEND. They told us that Ofsted should address the issues of children and learners with SEND being excluded or off-rolled.[\[footnote 1\]](#) They felt that Ofsted should be making sure all children and learners have access to education. Parents also told us that schools that are failing children and learners with SEND should be rated as failing overall.

Parents of children and learners with SEND told us that they would like Ofsted to report on how government policies affect the quality of provision. This included how providers work with external services and agencies to support children and learners with SEND. Staff in schools also told us that Ofsted should recognise the challenges schools face when working with external services. Some examples were limited funding and long wait times for specialist support. Parents suggested that Ofsted should hold authorities accountable in inspection reports.

Reporting on safety and safeguarding

Free-text responses across all sectors showed that respondents wanted reports to maintain a strong emphasis on the safety and safeguarding of children and learners.

Parents in early years told us that ensuring the safeguarding of children is a top priority. They would like Ofsted to focus more on these aspects.

In social care, respondents told us that reports should focus on children's safety, including site safety, staff training and understanding children's needs.

Sub-judgements

In our school inspection reports, we provide judgements on the quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development, and leadership and management. Most school respondents (at least 80%) indicated that it was either

'very important' or 'important' that Ofsted reports give a clear judgement for each of these sub-judgement areas.

In FE and skills, we asked respondents how important it was that reports make clear how providers address these sub-judgement areas and the impact this has on learners. Again, most respondents (at least 86%) said that this was 'very important' or 'important'.

A majority of respondents in teacher development (79%) told us that it was either 'very important' or 'important' that reports give a clear judgement of the quality of the leadership and management of the provider.

Groups or chains of providers

We asked in the early years, schools and social care questions if it was important for reports to make clear any links with other providers, for example a group or chain that shares staff and practices.

In early years and schools, about half of respondents thought this was 'very important' or 'important'.

In social care, most respondents (82%) indicated it was either 'very important' or 'important'.

What we heard about impact

The consultation asked about the impact of our inspections, to understand whether we are driving improvement or, in some cases, holding it back. This section gives the findings from closed questions and free-text responses about our impact.

Safety of children

In relation to early years, schools and FE and skills, the majority of respondents agreed that Ofsted holds providers to account for keeping children and learners safe. In early years, 77% agreed with this, in FE and skills 72% agreed, and in schools 69% agreed.

In relation to the early years sector, we also asked whether Ofsted reassures parents and carers that the providers we inspect and regulate keep children safe. A somewhat smaller proportion (54%) of respondents agreed with this.

Quality of education and care

We asked whether Ofsted holds providers to account for the quality of education offered in early years, schools, FE and skills and teacher development. In relation to social care, we asked whether Ofsted holds providers to account for the quality of their provision.

The percentage of respondents in each sector who agreed was:

- early years: 61%
- FE and skills: 61%
- social care: 60%
- schools: 52%
- teacher development: 52%

Teacher development respondents criticised Ofsted's inspection framework, saying that it does not accurately assess the quality of teacher development. Respondents told us that the current system should be significantly reformed because it does not adequately prepare trainees for the demands of teaching, and fails to cover necessary skills and knowledge. Respondents also highlighted issues such as the administrative burden on student teachers. They felt that political agendas influence the inspection process and teacher training standards, and that this potentially compromises the quality of education.

Respondents from the SEND sector said Ofsted should move away from a focus on test scores, as this is not in the students' best interests. They said that, instead, Ofsted should give a holistic view of education, focusing on personal development, well-being and development of broader skills. We also heard from schools' parents that pupils' well-being and mental health should be prioritised over academic achievements, to create a supportive learning environment.

Schools respondents felt that Ofsted does not provide adequate support or guidance to help schools improve after an inspection, leaving schools to address issues on their own. They called for Ofsted to provide more targeted support for schools that are struggling, rather than issuing negative judgements. Respondents also raised issues like fear, mistrust and politicisation of Ofsted inspections.

Ofsted grading as an indication of quality of the education and care system

Respondents across all sectors tended to disagree with statements suggesting that the number of good and outstanding providers gives a strong indication of the overall quality of the education and care system.

The most negative response related to schools, where 67% of respondents

disagreed with this, compared with 13% who agreed. In relation to early years, 48% of respondents disagreed, whereas 23% agreed (29% indicated they neither agreed nor disagreed). In relation to FE and skills, 36% disagreed and 27% agreed; for teacher development, 36% disagreed and 28% agreed; in relation to social care, 40% disagreed and 29% agreed; and in relation to SEND, 52% disagreed and 21% agreed. Teacher development respondents highlighted discrepancies between Ofsted grades and the actual quality of providers, questioning the reliability of good or outstanding inspection judgements as an indicator for the quality of providers.

Respondents questioned the effectiveness of Ofsted's current methods. For schools, as already discussed in the [inspection practice section](#), they suggested that a more collaborative, in-depth and less judgemental approach would better raise educational standards and improve the lives of pupils. Through free-text responses, some respondents suggested that Ofsted should be abolished or undergo a complete reform because it does not improve education quality and causes harm. Some respondents also suggested that Ofsted, in its current form, is detrimental to education.

We heard from parents that, in relation to early years, more government funding is essential for improving standards, rather than focusing on Ofsted's role alone.

Despite the views given by some respondents in free-text responses, it is notable that responses to closed questions indicate that respondents were overall supportive of the principle or value of inspection. In total, we posed 8 questions asking whether Ofsted should have oversight of additional forms of provision that we do not currently inspect. In all 8 cases, the majority of respondents were in favour of the extension. For example, 62% agreed that Ofsted should be able to inspect multi-academy trusts or other groups that schools may be a part of (such as local authorities, diocese or owners of large private independent school providers).

Quality of SEND provision

Across all sectors, about half of the respondents agreed that Ofsted holds providers to account for the quality of their SEND provision, and 65% agreed that Ofsted holds special schools to account for this. However, fewer (49%) agreed that Ofsted holds local areas to account for how well they support children with SEND and other vulnerable children. We also heard about the importance of extending accountability for SEND provision beyond schools to include local authorities and government policies, as these significantly influence the quality of SEND education.

Respondents commented that the lack of funding and resources for SEND provision makes it difficult for schools to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. Respondents highlighted the need for Ofsted to recognise the challenges schools face in supporting pupils with SEND. They felt Ofsted should consider these challenges in its evaluations and help schools to address them. Respondents also

said that teachers and staff require better training to support the diverse needs of pupils with SEND. They said the curriculum should be adapted to be more relevant and accessible for pupils with SEND, focusing on life skills and individual progress.

Quality of local authority children's services and children's social care providers

About half of respondents agreed that Ofsted holds local authority children's services (57%) and children's social care providers (60%) to account for the quality of their provision. We heard that Ofsted should build supportive relationships with children's homes. They suggested that reducing the pressure on inspectors and offering guidance to children's homes could help to improve interactions.

A majority of respondents (70%) agreed that Ofsted should focus more on the experiences and progress of children who are cared for/supported by providers and services than on compliance with regulations.

Unintended consequences of Ofsted inspections

Around half (57%) of respondents agreed that the inspection system can lead to schools keeping pupils in the classroom who may put other pupils at risk, benefit from off-site provision or require suspension. A slightly smaller proportion (46%) agreed that the inspection system can lead to exclusion, suspension and off-rolling. We heard from parents that schools should be held accountable for their actions, particularly in relation to practices like off-rolling and exclusions.

We also asked about unintended consequences of Ofsted's inspection and regulation for pupils with SEND. About half of respondents (58%) agreed that mainstream schools suspend, off-roll or place off site pupils with SEND as an unintended consequence of Ofsted inspection. Respondents also criticised Ofsted's inspection approach for having a negative impact on schools' focus on children with SEND. Early years and schools respondents said that Ofsted does not adequately support early years providers and schools in managing and funding SEND. Respondents told us that the challenges in managing and funding SEND can have a negative impact on staff, children and the quality of education and care provided.

For social care, the majority (70%) of respondents agreed that an unintended consequence of Ofsted's inspection and regulation is that children's homes sometimes do not accept the children most in need into their care. In addition, 59% of respondents agreed that, as an unintended consequence of Ofsted's inspection and regulation, children's homes sometimes accept children into their care that they are not best placed to support.

Expansion of Ofsted's oversight and inspection remit

In addition to the majority of respondents (62%) being in favour of Ofsted inspecting multi-academy trusts or groups of schools (as discussed earlier in this section), the majority also agreed that Ofsted should be able to:

Have greater powers to address unregistered providers that have vulnerable children in their care (84%) – in free-text responses, respondents said that all alternative provision, including unregistered provision, needs to be regulated and inspected to ensure that pupils with SEND are safe and receive a high-quality education.

Have an oversight role for smaller unregulated providers (for example, unregistered alternative provision) (78%).

Inspect chains of early years providers (68%).

Inspect groups of social care providers as an entity (for example, large private care home providers) (67%).

Inspect part-time provision for 14- to 16-year-old learners who are in FE colleges that are not registered at a school (64%).

Inspect higher technical qualifications (61%).

What we heard about safeguarding in schools

Safeguarding is the action taken to promote children's welfare and protect them from harm. As part of the Big Listen, we asked about the frequency of

safeguarding inspections, whether safeguarding should be separate from leadership and management, and whether we should reinspect safeguarding in some cases. This section sets out the findings from both the closed questions and the free-text responses to our current and proposed approaches to inspecting safeguarding.

We heard that safeguarding should be considered a priority in inspections and failures to safeguard children should be urgently addressed.

Frequency of safeguarding inspections

Most school inspections happen about once every 4 years. We reinspect some schools sooner than this because of their inspection grade, and we also carry out emergency inspections. But this does mean that we only inspect safeguarding in most schools about every 4 years.

Respondents suggested that we should inspect safeguarding separately from standard school inspections. Some said schools should have annual safeguarding audits by external bodies or local authorities to ensure statutory compliance and continuous improvement. Around half (58%) of respondents agreed that Ofsted should inspect safeguarding more regularly than other areas, but 42% disagreed. Parent respondents were more likely to agree that safeguarding should be inspected more regularly: 86% of them agreed with this, compared with 54% of school staff.

Reporting on safeguarding

Our judgement on whether safeguarding arrangements in a school are effective currently comes under the 'leadership and management' judgement. This means the safeguarding judgement often affects the school's overall grade. In our Big Listen survey, we asked about having a safeguarding judgement that is separate from the leadership and management judgement.

Most respondents (84%) thought that safeguarding should be separate from the leadership and management judgement.

Ofsted's new approach to safeguarding

In the Big Listen, we explained the steps we have already taken to change our approach to safeguarding, following the coroner's report into the tragic death of headteacher Ruth Perry. Our approach can be put into practice when a school is good in all other areas but is ineffective in safeguarding. Where there are minor

safeguarding issues that can be resolved quickly, we give the school time to do this during the inspection. This allows the school to put matters right before we reach a final judgement. Additionally, when the issues are more serious, but leaders have proven capacity to fix them urgently, but not during the inspection, we publish the report and carry out a rapid reinspection within 3 months. This new approach allows the school to put matters right and have its grade changed swiftly back to good or outstanding.

We further explained in the Big Listen that, following an internal review, we are considering further changes to this approach. We suggested that if safeguarding arrangements are ineffective but the school is good or better in all other areas, we could postpone finalising a judgement for up to 3 months to allow the school to fix the issues. Unlike our current approach, this would mean holding back the inspection report. Within 3 months, we would reinspect safeguarding at the school and then publish our report. If the safeguarding issues are resolved at this reinspection, the school will be awarded a good or outstanding grade. We asked respondents for their views on this potential change.

Respondents had mixed views on holding back the report. We heard that Ofsted's new approach is fairer, as schools that otherwise provide a high quality of education are not penalised for minor safeguarding issues. Respondents also said the approach could be less damaging to a school's reputation, which would reduce stress on school leaders and staff. However, respondents expressed concern that withholding inspection reports could lead to anxiety and speculation. They said this could potentially cause more damage than the previous approach. Respondents also had mixed opinions on delaying the publication of school inspection reports. They expressed fears that the report may be perceived as less effective and trustworthy. We also heard concerns from parents about a lack of transparency if safeguarding issues are not reported immediately.

More generally, respondents advocated for a shift towards a more supportive and collaborative approach, where Ofsted works with schools to improve safeguarding practices. School staff indicated the need for clearer and more consistent criteria for safeguarding. They said inspections should focus on safety rather than administrative compliance. We heard that single-word judgements, in the context of safeguarding, are oversimplified and should be removed. Instead, respondents suggested that Ofsted adopt a method of reporting that provides a more nuanced understanding of a school's practice.

School staff highlighted the impact of external agencies on a school's ability to safeguard pupils effectively. They suggested Ofsted should take external agencies into account during inspections. Respondents also told us that schools require funding for training and resources to safeguard pupils effectively.

What we heard about the schools 'pause policy'

In January 2024, we implemented a new ['pause policy' for schools](#). The policy set

out the circumstances when an inspection can be formally paused, for example when leaders require support, and set out the process for doing so. As part of the Big Listen, we asked our stakeholders in schools for their views on the new policy and how it could best work for schools and pupils.

Respondents who viewed the pause policy as positive said it is a step in the right direction. They saw it as a sign that Ofsted acknowledges the pressure that comes with inspection. Others said the policy was a symptom of a flawed system that requires more fundamental reform.

Those who supported the policy said it could reduce stress. However, they said Ofsted should apply it fairly and pauses should be limited in duration. Respondents called for clear criteria on when and how Ofsted will grant a pause. They said this is necessary to ensure that the policy is applied transparently and consistently.

Respondents who expressed concerns felt that Ofsted may view requests for a pause in a negative light. They thought Ofsted might see requests as a poor reflection on leadership, which could influence the outcome of the inspection. Parents and carers were concerned that pausing inspections might lead to safeguarding concerns being overlooked or not addressed promptly. Professionals also felt that a more supportive and fair inspection process would remove the need for the policy.

Annex 1: Methods statement

Ethics

The consultation gained ethical approval from our Research Ethics Committee. This committee includes external academic experts.

Participation in the consultation was voluntary and participants could complete as much or as little of the survey as they wished. It was made clear in the privacy notice and throughout the survey that respondents should not use this to report any safety or safeguarding concerns.

All responses were submitted anonymously. IP addresses were not collected. The demographic data collected was stored separately on the condition that it would not be analysed alongside individual responses. The aim of the public consultation was to collect views on how Ofsted needs to change. In line with standard research ethics guidelines, the datasets (both responses and the demographic data stored separately) were not used to identify any respondent.

The survey was designed to be accessible. Survey questions were written in plain English and produced in a format compatible with screen readers. Participants could request a printable electronic version of the consultation that they could print

and complete offline.

Data collection

We ran a 12-week public consultation between 8 March and 31 May 2024. Responses were collected using an online survey. Respondents could also request a printable electronic version of the consultation, which contained the same questions. Respondents could contribute their views through free text and by answering closed questions about the sectors Ofsted inspects and regulates.

Questions were organised around the themes of Ofsted's culture, inspection practice, reporting and inspection impact for each sector that Ofsted inspects and regulates. Additionally, there were questions about safeguarding in schools and the pause policy that Ofsted introduced in January 2024 for school inspections. There were free-text questions for all themes and closed questions for inspection practice, reporting, inspection impact and schools' safeguarding. Respondents could choose which questions they answered.

Respondents were also asked in which capacity they were responding (for example, as a parent, or a teacher) and where they worked if they were answering in a professional capacity. Each respondent could select multiple roles.

The Big Listen public consultation received 16,033 responses. More than half of respondents chose to answer at least some questions relating to more than one sector. In total, we received nearly 75,000 free-text responses. Responses ranged in length from a single word to hundreds of words.

Data analysis

Closed-question responses

For the closed questions, responses were analysed as a percentage of the respondents who answered the question. Some closed questions gave a 'don't know' answer option. These were treated as if the respondent had not answered the question. Counts and percentages relating to closed questions were calculated without any weighting.

Free-text responses

As is becoming more common across government, to improve efficiency, the free-text responses were analysed with assistance from artificial intelligence (AI). [\[footnote 2\]](#) This was fully validated by a team of data science and social research professionals.

Before we analysed the data, we used the 'named entity recognition' component of

the SpaCy library (a tool for natural language processing) to remove names where respondents had named individuals in their response.^[footnote 3] Additionally, we replaced common acronyms, such as 'SEND', with their full forms ('special educational needs and disabilities') so that we could better identify topics and themes across the survey responses during subsequent text analysis.

All responses to the 27 free-text questions were analysed first using AI and then using K-means clustering (both explained below). Each approach generated an output for each of the 27 free-text questions, producing 54 outputs for subsequent validation. Additionally, the same analytical process was carried out for some subgroups of respondents (see below). For the AI and clustering approach to be reliable (limitations on the approach are discussed below), at least 250 responses to a free-text question were required. When considering all respondents, each of the 27 free-text boxes had at least 250 responses. We were only able to analyse responses from subgroups of respondents when there were sufficient (250 or more) responses to free-text questions.

AI analysis

For each of the 27 free-text boxes, we prompted OpenAI's GPT-4 Turbo large language model (LLM) to summarise the responses into the 10 most frequently occurring topics and produce a description of each topic. Access to this LLM was provided through Microsoft's Azure OpenAI Service, which does not share data with third parties, and the LLM was accessed through Ofsted computers.

LLMs can only process a limited number of words at a time, and GPT-4 Turbo has a limit of around 100,000 words.^[footnote 4] When there were larger numbers of responses, the responses were split into roughly equal sizes. Consequently, as the number of responses to a question got larger, so did the number of AI-generated topics.

Validation of AI analysis

Every AI-generated topic was validated by a team of data science and social research professionals to check that the output was genuinely reflective of the survey responses.

To do this, each AI-generated topic description plus the corresponding sentences in the survey responses were transformed into vectors using term frequency – inverse document frequency (TF-IDF). This is a statistical method in natural language processing that measures how important a word is in each sentence compared with all other sentences. Transforming sentences into vectors enables related sentences to be statistically grouped together based on the angle between the vectors. Using this measure of similarity, each AI-generated topic description was matched with the 20 most similar sentences.

Researchers then validated every AI-generated topic description by reading the accompanying 20 sentences to determine whether the topic was coherent and whether the description was accurate. When validating a topic, if the exact same text appeared more than twice in the accompanying 20 sentences, the text only passed validation once. This was regardless of whether the text was from the

same respondent or not. Any topics that did not pass this validation were discarded.

K-means clustering analysis

To mitigate the possibility that the AI analysis failed to find topics in the survey responses, we used an additional natural language processing approach that focused on word frequency.

For each of the 27 free-text boxes, the responses were split into sentences and converted to TF-IDF vectors. Vectors that occurred extremely infrequently were removed using latent semantic analysis to reduce sparsity in the data. The sentences were then assigned to separate groups (clusters) using K-means clustering. As with the AI-generated topics, more clusters were generated when there were larger numbers of responses. For each cluster, GPT-4 Turbo was prompted with the 20 sentences closest to the centre to summarise them into a topic description. A team of data science and social research professionals used the 20 sentences to validate the topic description.

Consolidation

Researchers reviewed the validated AI topics for both methods for each question and removed topics that were repeated – these were never exact duplicates, but the content was almost identical. The topics for all questions in a sector were grouped together by themes, with further removal of almost identical topics.

Differences between respondent types

All closed and free-text questions were analysed for all respondents. In addition, we wanted to understand the differences between respondent types. We were interested in whether people who work in a specific sector answered differently to all respondents. We were also interested in whether parents expressed different views from all respondents. This was for both qualitative and quantitative questions.

To identify respondents with roles relating to particular sectors, we looked at their answers to the questions 'Please tell us in which capacity you are completing this survey. (Tick all that apply.)' and 'If you are responding in a professional capacity, please specify where you work.'

For FE and skills and social care, analysis of quantitative data did not show any notable differences, so we did not examine differences in the qualitative data. For teacher development, we were unable to identify a group of respondents that work specifically in this sector. For SEND, all workplaces need to have expertise, so we did not select a subgroup of respondents.

Respondents were identified as having a school-related role if they:

- worked in a school, worked in a local authority but answered school-related questions, or worked for a school group (multi-academy trust, diocese or other group) and/or

- completed the survey in the capacity of a teacher, governor, headteacher/principal, other school staff, multi-academy trust representative, trainee teacher, early career teacher, national professional qualification participant or proprietor of an independent school

Throughout the report, this group is referred to as school staff.

Respondents were categorised as having an early-years-related role if they:

- were employed in a registered childcare setting; were a registered early years childminder; were an early years provider employed directly by a school; or were a childcare worker and/or
- indicated that their workplace was a maintained nursery school, or that they worked in an early years provider or a local authority and answered questions related to early years

Throughout the report, this group is referred to as early years staff.

We carried out free-text analysis of the responses from early years staff for early years questions and school staff for schools questions. We used the AI approach described above to generate and validate sentences. We then compared the staff sentences to the sentences for all respondents and stated in the report where there were differences.

We were also interested in whether parents raised different topics from all respondents. We selected a subgroup of parents who did not have another role in which they might be inspected by Ofsted.

Respondents were categorised in this group if they:

- only ticked the parent role
- ticked the parent role and, in addition, only roles on the following list: pupil/student, adult learner/student, care leaver/care-experienced adult, member of the public, healthcare professional, employer without an education and skills funding agency or apprenticeship levy training contract, or prefer not to say

In the report, we refer to this group of respondents as parents.

For the early years, schools and SEND questions we carried out free-text analysis of parent responses. We used the AI approach described above to generate and validate sentences. We then compared the parents' sentences with the sentences for all respondents and stated in the report where there were differences.

For the FE and skills, social care and teacher development questions, there were fewer than 250 parent responses; therefore, we did not carry out additional analysis of free-text responses for these groups.

For all sectors, where possible we have presented the responses to closed questions of subgroups of staff or of parents in the supplementary [data tables](#).

Reporting

The report draws together the closed question and free-text responses where possible. For the closed questions, we chose not to report all percentages within the narrative to keep the report succinct (but we have separately [published the full data tables](#)). Instead, we discussed the range of responses across sectors where they are similar, and commented on where there are differences. For the free-text responses, we included all the AI-generated topic summaries that passed the validation from our team of data science and social research professionals.

In the culture theme, we stated that it is crucial that we are culturally sensitive to the providers we work with, to reassure them that we understand the context that they work in and the people they work with. However, there was no closed question on this topic and no topics arose through the AI analysis of the free-text responses.

Given the high number of responses to the public consultation, it was not possible to include all views in this report. The absence of a particular issue or viewpoint in this report does not indicate that it is less important, and we value all contributions we have received.

It is worth noting that we have limited our reporting to relaying what we heard from the public consultation. In some cases, responses reflected misconceptions about Ofsted's policies and practices, and these are included in the report without any caveats or corrections. We have not commented on or responded to any of the views shared through the public consultation in this report. If readers wish to see how Ofsted has responded, please go to [The Big Listen response](#).

As mentioned above, with this report, we are also publishing the [data tables from the Big Listen public consultation](#). We are also exploring the best way to share the raw data with the research community, so that other researchers can do further analysis to help us improve.

Referring to quantitative data

When referring to quantitative data analysis from the closed questions in the report, we have used the following phrasing in place of presenting percentages:

Almost none	Less than 5%
Few	Less than 20%
Some	20% or more but less than 40%
Around half	40% or more but less than 60%

A majority	60% or more but less than 80%
Most	More than 80%
Almost all/all	More than 95%

Strengths and limitations

The questions were chosen to gain stakeholders' views on the topics of Ofsted's culture, inspection practice, reporting, and inspection impact. We were unable to ask directly about the 'single-word judgements' due to the clear policy position of the previous government. However, the free-text questions did draw out views on topics beyond what was directly asked, and we have included these in the report. Views on 'single-word judgements' were sought directly from providers and professionals through the research commissioned through IFF Research. Views were also sought from the public and parents/carers through the research commissioned through National Centre for Social Research.

This is the first time Ofsted has used AI in the analysis of consultation responses. It has enabled us to analyse many more free-text responses (nearly 75,000) than would otherwise have been possible. The analysis was led by in-house data science and social research professionals who, in using novel and innovative analysis techniques, had to make some analytical choices. For example, we dedicated significant testing time to ensuring that the AI analysis would accurately identify topics and not miss anything important. However, in the time available, it was not possible to assess the prevalence of these views. To address this limitation, we did a limited word search on the free-text responses to better understand the prevalence of views for some of the key findings in our report, for example in relation to inspectors' conduct and inspection practice. This helped to provide a sense of scale in relation to the findings and where possible, we have reflected this in the report.

1. Off-rolling is the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without using a permanent exclusion, when the removal is primarily in the best interests of the school, rather than in the best interests of the pupil. This includes pressuring a parent to remove their child from the school roll. [↩](#)
2. [i.AI Consultation Analyser](#) is an AI-powered tool to automate the processing of public consultations. [↩](#)
3. For technical detail, you can view: [EntityRecognizer · spaCy API documentation](#). [↩](#)
4. For technical detail, you can view: [Models overview by OpenAI API](#). [↩](#)

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